

**Stratford Circus is only the third purpose-built arts venue to be built in London. Louise Stickland thinks it will have no trouble following in the footsteps of the South Bank Centre and the Barbican**

The seemingly irrepressible social and cultural zing eastward from the metropolis continues with this landmark venue. Hot on the heels of the gleaming Stratford tube station, E15 is fast becoming an off-West End hub for entertainment, design and architecture. March saw the opening of the acclaimed Ocean Music Centre in Hackney, aimed at bringing live music to the forefront of E8.

The five-space Stratford Circus is yet another reason for performance-loving Londoners to venture past Holborn on the Central Line. The lottery-funded venue reflects the diverse cultures of the local neighbourhood, whilst simultaneously filling a niche in the London arts scene. Like Ocean, community involvement, educational schemes and activities have been central to the creative programming. The foresight suggests that if you can inspire young people to be interested and stimulated by theatre early on - they will stick with it as a worthwhile activity.

Stratford Circus's schedules are therefore designed to be as inclusive and versatile as possible. It might be Bollywood, a tea dance, DJ workshops, experimental performance, talks and personal appearances, video making, films, break dancing, steel bands or rock bands - Stratford Circus offers something for everyone wanting to be involved in the creative process - at very affordable prices.

One of director Jon Harris's visions is that Stratford Circus and its lively agenda of events should reach people who've not necessarily set foot in an arts centre before. "I believe the only way we can create new audiences for work in London is to inspire a new sense of ownership and involvement in the arts."

Once the building ball started rolling, for technical manager Phillip Dexter - who came onboard in September 2000 - the Stratford Circus technical fit-out soon evolved into a very ambitious project.

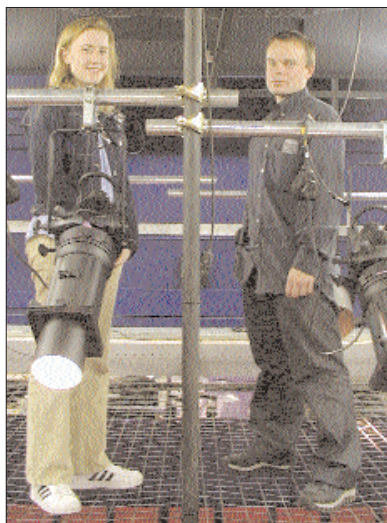
The quietly-spoken New Zealander's previous experience includes stints at The Royal Opera House Covent Garden, The Royal College of Music and the Hampstead Theatre.

Chief technician Charlotte Walker was appointed in April this year, and she and Dexter were responsible for the intense fit-out period. The original plan allotted five weeks for the technical infrastructure to be put in place from scratch - but the reality whittled down to just eight days! (The tight in-house technical team was recently completed with the addition of assistant technician Gareth Connelly.)

In that time, the team had to install three quarters of a million pounds worth of gear, as well as having to mask all areas and fit the seating units - all the bars were being built, kitchens kitted out, etc, at the same time and "It was completely manic!" states Walker, now able to grin at the memory. The result is impressive and today you might think you are walking into a Conran restaurant! The building, designed by architects Levitt Bernstein, features an open, welcoming foyer space and is clad with plenty of wood, metal and large expanses of glass, beckoning an abundance of natural light.

I meet with Phillip Dexter and Charlotte Walker in the modern café area - a tastefully decorated space with lots of plants which is soon full of people and chattering. The venue's largest space is Circus 1, a multi-purpose theatre accommodating up to 314 seated and 400 standing in a variety of formats - traditional proscenium arch/end on, traverse, an in-the-round space or a flat floor space. There's also provision for 15 wheelchairs - as with all new venues, disabled access is considered at the outset!

Circus 2 is a fully flexible studio space with 120 seated or 200 standing. Metrodeck rostra from Maltbury are available to provide



either raked seating or a raised stage. Circus 3 is a large dance space (approx 168sq.m) on the third floor of the building and hosts a wide selection of dance performance and workshops - from contemporary to ballet. All three spaces have sprung oak floors covered in Harlequin Cascade dance floor vinyl.

Circus 4 is a workshop room for about 20 people on level 2, intended for educational applications, presentations, poetry readings, etc. Circus 5 is a multi-media suite, full of Apple G4s, loaded with Final Cut Pro and other DV editing software. Cameras and recording gear are also available, and the facilities are open to companies, visiting shows, schools and colleges or anyone who has reason to make and edit videos.

Stratford Circus will host over 2,000 productions a year - from visiting slots by top international artists and theatre companies to their own productions and co-productions with other venues. The co-production axis can dramatically increase the cost-effectiveness of setting up a show. Naturally, maximum flexibility was top of the agenda for technical facilities. Once on the team, Dexter's immediate task was to start filling all the spaces with gear.

Theatre Projects Consultants produced the original sound, lighting and stage engineering specifications back in '96, when the Lottery bid was processed. TPC were pragmatic in outlook, taking into consideration that the available equipment would have changed by the time the fit-out was a reality.

They produced two specs. One was tendered and won by the time Dexter was in place. The other was tendered but not finalized, specifically to allow additional spontaneous leeway for the 'head of technical' to make

the final decisions, and to be in a position to purchase the equipment available now, as opposed to four years ago.

The biggest challenge, explains Dexter, was making the budget stretch! Despite working to 1996 figures, suppliers like Northern Light - who delivered the lighting (and later the audio) - came in with excellent deals - and also supplied and installed the dimming and hard wiring. Dexter also had to figure out how the different spaces within the venue would function technically, both as individual entities and as integrated elements of the whole.

Circus 1 has the most scope for staging numerous options. The dynamic flying facilities, orchestra pit lift, drapes and curtains were all supplied and installed by Telestage. The grid is 10 metres high and the flying consists of 43 sets of single purchase counterweighted bars with a weight loading of 400kgs, spaced approximately 200mm apart. This gives plenty of options for scenery, projection screens and over-stage lighting positions. The wall-to-wall stage dimensions are 15.27 metres wide by 11.91 deep, and the pros arch is also adjustable in both width and height.

Dexter picked lanterns to address a broad range of theatrical options. Many are from the Strand range, including SL profiles of varying degrees - some with cold mirror reflectors, Cantata and Alto PCs, 3-way Iris 3 cyc lights and Coda ground rows. There's also a bunch of Thomas Par 64 cans for Stratford Circus's many 'more rock 'n' roll' moments.

Venue-wide lighting control is provided by Strand. There's a 520i console in Circus 1 and a 300 Series in Circus 2, plus a roving MX24. All locations within the venue are

fully Ethernetted, the idea being that boards can be linked together and shows backed up and moved between them as desired. Dexter was keen to choose a console with reliable, solid networking protocol, and that's what swayed him towards Strand. The fact that many people are also familiar with Strand desks was also important.

The dimmers are Strand LD 90s. "They're cheap, cheerful and do the job," comments Dexter. The eight presets available on these means they can also run the house lighting

and basic states from strategically-located push-button outstations.

The dimmers are a mixture of 2K and 5K modules. The carcasses were fitted into the dimmer room early on in the build process, with the modules following later - a great advantage in terms of enabling the wiring to proceed unabated. The carcasses were initially fitted before the roof of the building was

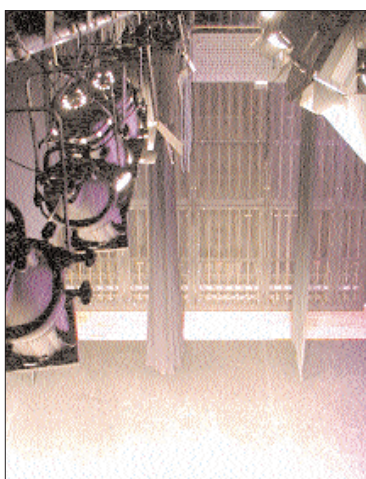


Left, chief technician Charlotte Walker and technical manager Phillip Dexter; above and below, lighting grid shots from Circus 1

watertight, so the whole was frequently soaked. "It looked like the Poseidon Adventure some days!" says Dexter. Circus 1 also has a tension wire grid supplied by Slingco.

The sound specification was also initially drawn up by TPC - and encountered several setbacks, including the suppliers going into administration before completing the contract. At the time of my visit, the team at Stratford were using portable sound trolleys for shows with audio requirements. These trolleys each contained an eight-channel Soundcraft powered mixer, CD player and cassette deck. They also had a multipoint connector that taps into the building-wide sound patch system, allowing mixer inputs to access mic, tie lines and numerous speaker outputs in the different areas. For the larger shows or those needing more of a rock 'n' roll reinforcement scenario, they called on Richard Nowell Sound.

However, temporary has now given way to permanent, and Northern Light, having taken on the sound contract, have recently returned to the venue to install Tannoy I-12s and P-40 subs in Circus 1, and Tannoy I-8s across the rest of the building. Amplification is provided by a combination of Inter-M 500 and 700s - an amplifier commonly used in paging systems - whilst the mixing is handled by a pair of Allen & Heath GL2000s (offering 12 and 16 channels). A system link has been installed so the two can be run together when required. Circus 1 has a host of Yamaha processing kit including graphic EQs, an SPX 990 and Pro R3 reverb, together with Denon CD players and a Sony Mini disc, with Drawmer compressors being used across the system.







Stratford Circus was always designed for easy OB connectivity - and lots of it - and also for their own in-house video facilities and IT networking. With the cabling all in place, it's already proving a popular location for film and TV company shoots.

Jon Harris wanted a flexible in-house video system capable of switching between events happening in the past or present - to produce a time-based collage of activity - and messaging and information services. He suggested the positions for internal monitors and Dexter came up with a basic spec - and a

budget - which then had to be halved! Looking at what was available for the money, the building-wide AV system centres on a Crestron control system and is administered using touch screen controllers.

It was vital that this was easy to use. Dexter saw Northern Light's installation at Norden Farm Arts Centre in Maidenhead, and from there, he and Northern Light's Stewart Archibald devised the Stratford Circus system, which functions exactly as envisioned. Inputs into the system consist of camera feeds from Circus 1 and 2, plus satellite TV, video, DVD

*In 1996 a proposal for the refurbishment of the Theatre Royal, Stratford East was submitted. It was accepted in the summer of that year. Construction work for what would come to be known as Stratford Circus finally commenced in April 1999. By this stage, it was an ambitious timescale for a ground up project of this complexity.*

and an information PC running Power Point for simple presentations and messaging. These all feed into the Crestron, and, via a series of touch screens around the building, staff can type in their code and have access to selected inputs and outputs. The monitors are grouped into zones and the sources are assigned to the zones by the touch panels.

Harris applied for additional funding and sourced an impressive LED screen (supplied by Gearhouse) for the exterior of the building. It looks fabulous, is a great local talking point and is used to advertise events or to hook into the house AV as required.

It's early days yet for the new venue, but the signs are already very positive that it will boost the regeneration of the area. The first three months of operation at Stratford Circus have been highly successful, setting an energetic pace for the venue's development into a social hub for locals and visitors alike.

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